

Tabu customs of the warpath amongst the Sea Dayaks of Sarawak.

A few months ago the Government of Sarawak arranged a punitive expedition against a troublesome border tribe. The army was made up partly of the regulars, the Sea Dayak Rangers, but mainly of the able-bodied men called out from all the houses of the Batang Lupar district: the largest contingent came from the village of Banting where the customs here related came before the notice of my wife. Whilst their husbands were away on the warpath the Dayak women, one and all observed several trivial ceremonies and omitted certain items belonging to the routine of an ordinary day; and on enquiry my wife learnt that these were performed for the benefit of their husbands in accordance with the principles of sympathetic magic. We are indebted to Miss Hall of the Banting Mission House for the following list of tabus followed by the women at home and by the men on the warpath.

The women.

(1) They must awaken early in the morning and with the streak of dawn the windows must be opened: otherwise their husbands will oversleep themselves and may be caught by the enemy. As the windows are opened early to bring light into the room so will it be light and bright when the men commence their march.

(2) It is forbidden (pemali) for them to oil the hair lest their husbands slip when walking on a 'batang' path (a path of tree trunks). It was the unusual untidiness of the ladies' hair which first called for remark when my wife arrived at Banting.

(3) They must not sleep during the daytime or the men will be drowsy when walking.

(4) Every morning they must scatter popcorns (made of rice) on the verandah: and just as the elastic popcorn bounds and rebounds on the hard floor so will the men be agile in their movements. At the same time the women sing a verse—

Oh kamba, enti tinggi surok,
 Enti baroh, perjok
 Munsoh suroh genong
 Awak ka baka ditanggong, baka sangkutong.

which being interpreted is

'Oh you absent ones dodge under the high obstacles and leap over the low ones. Petrify the enemy and keep off the hands raised against you.'

(5) It is pemali to bathe in the usual way with the petticoat on: for just as the garment would become wet and heavy so would their husband feel heavy in body and unable to move rapidly.

(6) The room must be kept very tidy, all boxes being placed near the walls; for should any one stumble in the house so may the men fall when walking and thus be at the mercy of the enemy.

(7) They must eat food only at meal times and then properly sitting down; otherwise the men will be tempted to chew leaves or earth when on the march.

(8) At each meal a little rice must be left in the pot and this must be put aside: this ensures that the men shall have plenty to eat and need never become hungry.

(9) On no account may a woman sit so long at the loom as to have the cramp; Or the men will surely become stiff and be unable to rise up quickly after resting or to run away.

Accordingly the women intersperse their weaving operations by frequent walks up and down the verandah.

(10) It is forbidden to cover up the face with a blanket or the men will not be able to find their way through tall grass or jungle.

(11) They must not sew with a needle or the men will tread upon 'tukak' (sharpened spikes of bamboo placed point upwards in the ground by the enemy).

(12) Flowers must not be worn nor scent used ; otherwise the movements of the men will be revealed to the enemy by their smell.

(13) It is unlucky to break the 'kain apit' (the piece of leather or bark of tree with which the women support their backs when weaving) ; should this occur the men will be caught by the chin on some overhanging bough.

(14) Should a wife prove unfaithful in the absence of her husband he will lose his life in the enemy's country.

The men.

(1) Must not cover up the rice when cooking or their vision will become obscured and the way difficult to see.

(2) The spoon must not be left standing up in the rice pot ; otherwise the enemy will so leave a spear sticking in their bodies.

(3) During cooking time should the pots be a distance apart from each other they must be connected by sticks ; so will the men have neighbours near at hand should they be surprised by the enemy. It is customary to put the pots very near together.

(4) It is pemali to pick out the bits of husk from the rice when feeding lest the enemy in like manner pick out that man from a group.

(5) As the rice is taken from the pot the cavity thus left in the food must be immediately smoothed over ; otherwise wounds will not heal quickly.

(6) It is unlucky to sleep with legs crossed or touching those of a neighbour lest the spears of the enemy smite the unfortunate offender of this tabu.

Whether the men as a whole obey these rules I cannot say but certain it is that the women of Banting and of other villages in that neighbourhood followed the restrictions herein imposed. However ludicrous they may seem to us now these magical superstitions are not more gross than those which held sway in the minds of our own countrymen of mediaeval times and even today it would not be difficult to parallel them amongst the country folk of merrie England.

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